

## **Testimony of Coeli Brunty**

Hello. My name is Coeli Brunty and I am from Emmitsburg, Maryland. I am a 24-year-old, single, working mother of two boys, ages 3 and 5, and I am raising these children by myself. In order to do this, I have worked as a pizza delivery driver for James Gang Pizzeria for over 2 and ½ years. I commute 45 minutes each way to get to work and travel about 200-240 miles a week delivering pizzas. I work 4 days a week and earn \$7 an hour, plus tips, which sometimes may be only a dollar a day. Included in the \$7.00 an hour is a gas allowance of \$2.50 and I must pay all my work-related car expenses.

To manage my job and caring for my children, my sons go to school or Head Start — and day care — two days a week and my mom watches them 2 days a week. For awhile I lived with my mom, but I applied for an apartment through Section 8 Housing and finally a two-bedroom apartment became available. So now, I am paying \$164 a month in rent. This amount is based on my earnings, plus child support. I am supposed to receive a court-ordered child support for one of my children. But that check — \$64 a week — comes only sporadically.

Right now, I am receiving about \$ 170 a month in Food Stamps. What do Food Stamps mean to me? It means that I know my sons will never be hungry and that I can eat. I'm not sure we could make it without this help. Food Stamps are my safety net. When the child support checks don't come, Food Stamps mean I can buy milk, cereal and fruit for the boys to eat.

But, as a working parent, I do wish it were easier to get help from the Food Stamp Program. I have to visit the Food Stamp Office every 6 months to renew my Food Stamps. When I go to these appointments I have to drive 46 miles round trip, pay for gas and parking, and I usually have to stay for ½ hour to an hour — so I have to take time off from work. If less

frequent office visits were required, I would not have to take off of work. Employers don't like having frequent time-offs.

I also have had problems at the Food Stamp office because of the car that I own, which is necessary for my employment. I am responsible for repairing and maintaining my vehicle, carrying car insurance and covering other unforeseen car expenses. With my old car, during a 3 to 4 month period, I incurred repair costs of over \$2,000. My employer then recommended that I purchase a reliable vehicle in order to keep my job. I bought a bottom of the line, no-frills, Kia Rio, with a \$12,000 loan. This loan amount was needed in order to pay off the old car debt and purchase the new car. The bank required that I have a co-signer for this loan.

There is a limit, set by the Food Stamp Program, on the value of the car you can own, which I was never informed about. I learned that my Food Stamps had been cancelled because the car's value was over the limit. I appealed this decision and submitted information about the loan payments and a letter from my employer stating that a reliable vehicle is needed for my job. I had to wait 3 to 4 weeks to get definitive word that the decision was reversed and I could again receive Food Stamps. But the car still seems to be a source of contention because when I go in to do the periodic paperwork I am still questioned regarding my vehicle.

The Food Stamp Program means so much to me and my children, but if we could do something to make it easier for families like mine — who are trying to balance working, children's schedules and visits to social services — it would be a big help.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today.